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Living With The Tension: American Benedictine Women in Roman Catholic Church Structures

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**“LIVING WITH THE TENSION: AMERICAN BENEDICTINE WOMEN IN ROMAN
CATHOLIC CHURCH STRUCTURES”**

A THESIS

The Honors Program

College of Saint Benedict/ Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction “All College Honors”

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of Sociology

by

Tara L. Tollefson

May, 1999

APPROVAL PAGE

PROJECT TITLE: Living With the Tension: American Benedictine Women in Roman Catholic Church Structures.

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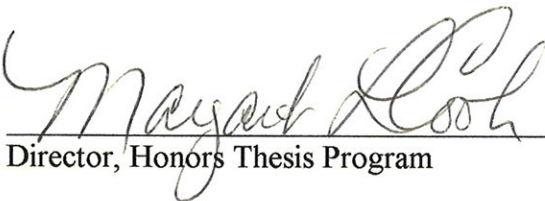
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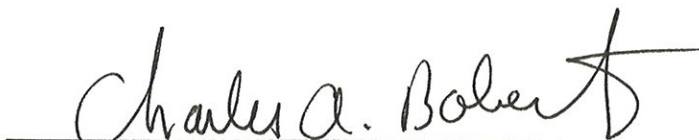
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Abstract

Living With The Tension: American Benedictine Women In Roman Catholic Church Structures.

This paper explores the tension felt by women religious in a Midwestern Benedictine community concerning the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy's unequal treatment of women. The Second Vatican Council, the renewal process, and the rise of modern feminism in America have all contributed to the sisters' awareness of the Church's discriminatory practices. While the hierarchy contends that women have a different yet equal role and dignity within the Church, my data and the literature indicate that women religious experience this "different" role as oppressive. As educated women in a Church structure, this paper answers the questions of the 30 sisters interviewed: Do they experience this tension in their daily lives? How do they cope? How do these coping patterns function within Roman Catholic Church structures?

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe my gratitude to a number of people for their support, input, time and patience over the last year and a half:

To the Sisters of Saint Benedict: Thank you for your gracious willingness to assist me in this project. It was, in part, your inspiration and strength that led my research in this path. I hope that this paper does justice to your community.

To my Thesis Advisor, Sheila Nelson: Thank you for your dedication, support, guidance and (most of all) patience in advising this project. You helped me to realize my potential as a sociologist--thank you for being my mentor!

To my Readers, Richard Albares and Martha Tomhave Blauvelt: Thank you for the interest, time and thoughtful criticism you invested in my project.

To those who gave of their time to help me with this project: Especially, Sister Linda Kulzer, O.S.B., who was gracious with her time, wisdom and enthusiasm; Sister Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B., for her support; a special thanks to my friend Sister Mary Kueblebeck, O.S.B., who listened attentively and advised graciously throughout the research process.

To my family and friends, for their endless support: Especially to my parents, Lew and Cindy Tollefson for their love and encouragement. To my roommate, Melissa Flavin, for having to listen to me obsess over this research for the last year and a half; also, for her ability to make me laugh no matter how stressed I am. Finally, and most importantly, to my son Andrew, who has (at times) had to compete for my attention as this thesis began to take on a life of its own. He is my joy and it is to him that I dedicate this work.

INTRODUCTION

Not surprisingly, little has been written about women religious until recent years. Intellectual circles tended to ignore women in history until the occurrence of the 1960s and '70s women's movement. Women religious, unfortunately, have been even more ignored; Patricia Wittberg addresses this problem in her work, *Creating a Future for Religious Life: A Sociological Perspective* (1991). Sociologists studying religion often focus on Roman Catholic priests and clerics while sociologists studying women's organizations or feminist issues often overlook women religious (p. 3). Studying women religious is necessary in furthering different sociological fields and in helping the general public understand these women they often see as "mysteries". Research and writings on women religious can also help the sisters understand themselves as they move into the future.

The lay public's belief in what a sister is, does, believes, and thinks is often skewed from stereotypes portrayed in the media (such as the movie *Sister Act*). These stereotypes typically are based on sisters' lives before the Second Vatican Council; however, with the implementation of Vatican II and its modernizing renewal process, Roman Catholic sisters' lives were forever changed. Religious women, formerly expected to ignore secular culture, were asked to adapt to a more modern way of life--leading to many tensions. As sisters became aware of American culture, the rise of modern feminism was occurring, making it difficult for women to ignore the unequal treatment of women within the Church. The sisters are no longer (not that they all ever were) blind followers of all Church teachings--they began to question and define their own lives. Confusion and tension ensued as women religious

earnestly attempted renewal and the Roman Catholic hierarchy (especially after 1978) began to retract promises and mandates of renewal.

In the current Church structures equal opportunities do not exist for women. In Pope John Paul II's "Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women", he addresses the issue of women necessarily holding a different position than men within the Church. He contends that

The fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary. . . received neither the mission proper to the apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the nonadmission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. (Origins, June 9, 1994: Vol. 24: No. 4).

However, the definition of women's roles in the Church as different yet equal clearly does not manifest itself as true. Indeed, my findings and the literature illustrate women being treated unequally by the Church. Church teachings such as this lead to the unequal treatment of women, thus compromising their dignity. This paper illustrates the inequalities inherent in Church structures and teachings and the tensions created by these inequalities in the lives of women religious.

I began my research questioning whether individual sisters experience these tensions in their everyday lives. Being a now highly educated group of women in America it was hard to imagine them not experiencing the tension. If correct, the question is: how do they cope? Since they are not leaving the Church, how will their coping patterns function within the Roman Catholic Church structures?

Research on women religious is limited and recent sociological studies are primarily quantitative. I limited my study to one community due to time and resource constraints. In a qualitative study I can focus on the sisters' narratives rather than on unifying background variables.

Because different religious orders and congregations vary greatly in their ministries and charisms, it is necessary for me to explain the nature of this community.

I am sampling a Midwestern Benedictine community. While some religious communities are “Apostolic” (having an “active thrust”), the Benedictines are more centralized and contemplative. Sister Linda Kulzer, O.S.B., a Benedictine for the last 51 years, explains a Benedictine’s purpose is to pray and to help people by praying. Significantly, Benedictine’s have daily prayer; also, Eucharist is very central to their lives. This means that most sisters are located at or near the monastery. As monastics, their community, rather than ministry, is central. As Kulzer says,

We used to be all over, but now we’re mostly here--we live and work in this area. With the implementation of Vatican II, we looked at our original charism and saw that we were called to be monastics. Also, we were losing members and members were aging, so we were forced to re-centralize. This helps us to pull together and see clearly our charism/purpose/essence. (1999).

The community’s structure is important when interpreting the data--the interviewees come from a very united and community based background. The way respondents experience, interpret and cope with tension may differ from other sisters due to focal and structural differences.

For the purposes of this paper, I will first review literature and historical contexts necessary to understand my research data and analysis. Including descriptive statistics, I will explain my methodology. Finally, my analysis is presented in two sections--the first defines and places the *tension* in an empirical context; the second groups the respondents by how they experience tension and then analyzes the sisters’ coping patterns.

IMPACT OF VATICAN II AND FEMINISM ON WOMEN

RELIGIOUS

The changes and historical settings of women religious since the 1950s are crucial in understanding them today. Following is a brief description of the sisters' lives before the Second Vatican Council and an explanation of how that Council and its renewal process changed sisters' lives and thoughts. Increased awareness from renewal and feminism caused confusion and tension for women religious. As I will explain, cultural influences and the resulting tensions have various possible theoretical outcomes.

Pre-Vatican II Life

Patricia Wittberg, S.C., in her work entitled *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (1994) explains that "religious communities are . . . thought to act as safety valves, which keep the Church's most committed and dedicated members within its bounds" (p. 45). Wittberg is careful to note that this is not always true, however most sources do seem to feel that "bound" was a fit adjective for American Benedictine women's pre-Vatican II lives. Even though sisters were often the hard-working labor force of the church, "they were considered too fragile to be exposed to the 'dangers of the world'" (Chittister et al. 1997: 20). Women religious were often treated as and acted as children or dependents; they were kept under tight control, whether by the Church authorities or their own strict standards. Ernestine Johann, O.S.B., says, "American monks have normally viewed themselves as adult and responsible members of their own communities; the sisters too often have allowed themselves to be taken care of by those

in authority" (Chittister et al. 1997: 21). Kulzer, in a 1998 speech given to former sisters of her community, states that the vow of poverty (as interpreted by Pre-Vatican II theology) was a "renunciation and austerity [that] resulted in a dependence that was much like children toward parents" (p. 4). Men religious were better educated in theology¹, giving them a better understanding of what the vows, such as obedience, actually meant; meanwhile, sisters "assumed that every request or even suggestion of the prioress . . . as well as such restrictions as asking permission to use the telephone . . . were subject to the vow of obedience." (p. 21). Kulzer says, "while the vow was formally restricted to specific mandates of superiors, the SPIRIT of the vow was generalized to the most minute aspects of daily life" (p. 4).

Modernization

Vatican II intended to modernize this behavior. Even before the Second Vatican Council, ideas of change had begun:

In 1950, American Benedictine women were typical of religious women generally. They suffered from a dearth of opportunity for in-depth theological education and a lack of awareness of their deprivation. Sister Mary Anthony Wagner² of St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, one of the few theologically educated Benedictine women of this era, recounted the situation in a paper, "Theology As An Influence in Convent Life," delivered before the American Benedictine Academy in August, 1950. That paper prompted the Academy to establish a committee of monks to consider ways to provide special programs for sisters. . . . Thus, in October, 1957, thirty-seven Benedictine prioresses from the four congregations of American Benedictine sisters . . . approved and signed a resolution establishing the Benedictine Institute of Sacred Theology, a program that they believed would best suit the needs of their own communities. They located the institute at St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, because of its proximity to St. John's Abbey . . . The BIST program quickly received accreditation through St. John's University at Collegeville, and by the mid-60's had evolved into a graduate

¹In fact, women were not allowed to attain degrees in theology until shortly after the time of the Sister Formation Movement of the 1950s.

²Sister Mary Anthony Wagner, O.S.B., was the assistant to the director of B.I.S.T., 1958-1963. B.I.S.T. then became the Saint John's School of Theology, where Wagner served as assistant to the dean of the Graduate School, 1964-1972; acting dean, 1973-1974; and dean of the Graduate School, 1974-1978.

theological program admitting not only Benedictine sisters, but any qualified religious women and men . . . who sought the degree. (Chittister et al. 1977: 83)

The above is an example of transformations occurring nationwide; the Sister Formation Movement was having monumental effects on the education and, thus, transformation of American women religious. In 1954, the Sister Formation Conference was established, "which recent writers have called 'the single most critical ground for the radical transformative process' of religious life that would occur [,] after Vatican II" (Wittberg 1994: 212). American sisters soon became "the most highly educated group of nuns in the Catholic Church, and among the most highly educated women in the United States" (p. 212). As Kulzer points out, the sisters in this Benedictine community "were on the cutting edge. In a way, we were more theologically educated than laypersons, priests, and bishops" (1999). Education was only the beginning of changes to occur.

During the 1950s, Pope Pius XII called American sisters "to adapt their 'excessively strict' cloister restrictions and reduce whatever nonessential and archaic customs were hindering their apostolates," in order to modernize the religious orders and address the problem of "the alarming drop-off of religious vocations in Europe after World War II" (Wittberg 1994: 210). A decade later, Vatican II emphasized in its document *Lumen Gentium* that "all members of the Church had received an equal call" and in *Gaudium et Spes*, as Wittberg interprets, that "the Church was to be in solidarity with the very world its religious orders had so long shunned" (p. 213-14). With these two documents, the Second Vatican Council dramatically altered how religious life was to be viewed

and lived. Religious had always been looked upon as having superior status; as Kulzer states, "prior to Vatican II, the religious life was considered a higher state of life than the lay state of life" (p. 8). That changed, however, with the publication of *Lumen Gentium*. "'Dislodged from a protected, clearly demarcated (and elite) 'state' sisters suddenly found themselves laity'" (Wittberg, p. 214). Beyond being laity, Vatican II also nullified at least part of the ideology of religious life, "the world-rejection motif." So, now American sisters were being called to renewal which denied them the status which had been theirs for "eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic religious life" and they had to modernize themselves to be more aware and in touch with their surrounding culture (p. 214). Thus, as is often said of renewal, "the windows of the world were opened for the sisters".

Renewal Creates Confusion

Aside from the overall confusion of the renewal process³, perhaps the most conflicted aspects of renewal occurred with the induction of Pope John Paul II⁴ and his apparent opposition to the renewal process that religious communities had been mandated to go through. As Hans Kung explains in the introduction to his edited work, *The Church in Anguish: Has the Vatican betrayed Vatican II?* (1986), "The [current] Roman church bureaucracy . . . never did want and never did like the Second Vatican Council, . . . never ceased lamenting the loss of the medieval-counterreformation-antimodernist image of the pope which had prevailed

³Difficulties occurred because "no member of a women's order or congregation was permitted to participate in, or even to attend, the first two sessions [of Vatican II]" and even when a few were admitted to later sessions, they were only admitted as auditors. The exclusion of women occurred even though "the Council's decisions . . . would deeply affect religious communities" (Wittberg 1994: 213).

⁴Karol Wojtyla was elected and became Pope John Paul II in 1978, well after the implementation of Vatican II and renewal.

in the pre-conciliar era” and “[hopes] to reinstate it as speedily as possible . . .” (Kung and Swidler p. 1). Ronald Modras, in his contributed chapter to this work, explains that Pope John Paul II does not see Vatican II as modernization; instead, for the pope, “the way to interpret Vatican II is not with its vision of the future but its ties to the past” (p. 48).

The Church hierarchy was quickly losing the “lock-step” control it had had for so long. In the early 1980s, there was a backlash by the Sacred Congregation of Religious when confronted with groups like the Leadership Council of Women Religious, such as when “the SCR routinely refused to answer LCWR’s repeated requests to be represented on the Vatican commissions that dealt with their lives” (Wittberg 1994: 261)⁵. And, in an attempt to re-establish control, the “SCR also repeatedly attempted to insert statements about obedience to the pope in the sisters’ new constitutions, whether or not such explicit obedience had been part of the order’s tradition” (p. 261). The SCR alienated many American women religious. Wittberg cites the phenomenon as “negative autonomy,” or to “claim to decentralize power and even create new, internally strong institutional organs . . . but in fact to grant these organs little or no authority” which “often leads to the radicalization of those excluded”(p. 261-2). With the numerous conflicts between Roman hierarchy and individual American women’s orders, many American sisters were thrown into tense and strange situations.

Due to conflicted definitions of renewal the women were in the middle of a renewal-induced identity crisis which Church officials chose to ignore rather than rectify. For example, renewal brought to the

⁵See more examples of backlash by the hierarchy to renewal efforts and to “overly liberal” actions of women religious in Chapter 18 of Kung and Swindler’s edited work *The Church in Anguish: has the Vatican Betrayed Vatican II?*.

attention of American Benedictine women that they had strayed away from some Benedictine ideals:

...Changes have concentrated on the responsible participation of all the members in those decisions which affect the whole community. This had always been the Benedictine ideal in accord with St. Benedict's Rule, but the American priories had modeled their notions of government on that of 19th century Europe and the hierarchical Church. It took the Vatican Council to bring the convents back to the conscious practice of delegation of authority and shared decision-making. (Chittister et al. 1977: 23)

As Chittister et al. later points out, it becomes clear that "renewal and change in religious communities had not been a rejection of religious life but a rejection of a European or medieval way of living it" (p. 243). While American Benedictine sisters were trying to go back to the "spirit of their founders," the SCR saw them as contradicting the Church's hierarchical authority.

In an attempt to regain control, Kulzer explains, "About 5-10 years ago we started to hear that renewal was 'only an experiment' and Vatican officials said, 'wait, when are you [sisters] coming back?' The more conservative members are now saying, 'Whoa!'" (1999). As Kolbensschlag (in her chapter of Kung and Swindler's work) explains, "[the changes of the post-Vatican II years] were far too integral, too intimately owned after a long internal process of dialogue, study, reflection, and action to be considered 'experimental'" (p. 252). And so, women religious in their continuance of renewal are in conflict with the goals of the current hierarchy.

Renewal of this Community

I will illustrate the changes that occurred with renewal for the community I am researching (with the gracious help of Sister Linda Kulzer, O.S.B.). I will now quote Kulzer at length from an outline of a

talk given to former sisters to explain changes since Vatican II and renewal:

With the Council came a shift in the emphasis of the vow of obedience. The Council insisted that the hierarchical image of the Church be replaced by one that visualized the Church as the people of God who together struggle to know God's will for humankind.

The two principles (collegiality and subsidiarity) are the basis for the structural changes in our life together:

- we began to have local communities without local superiors
- greater choices in career direction and specific job choice allowing negotiation between the needs of the order and the aspirations of the individual sister.
- discussion and openness in regard to decisions affecting the entire community (increase in chapter meetings made up of total community).
- small groups forming at motherhouse and other places--practice shared leadership.
- a personal budget system and personal financial responsibility.

Also, there was a shift away from identifying one person as the representative and interpreter of God's will to the belief that God's will is manifested through the gifts and talents of all the members.

It is imperative to understand that renewal was a mandated process for the sisters--one that they took very seriously. As Kulzer points out,

When we were first expected to change, we were coming from a kind of tract that never looked beyond the present. . . we received a . . . warning, to get out of our medieval ways . . . we were told we MUST change. So, we said, 'Okay, then, let's change!' and we really studied our changes. We were so thorough and gung-ho. . . (Kulzer 1999).

The new structure Kulzer describes is very different from both the old version of religious life and the Church's hierarchical structure

The goal of renewal (modernization) gives legitimacy to the claim that secular cultural influences do exist within religious orders. Wittberg (1994) states that the "beliefs, values, and practices current in the surrounding society, by subtly affecting the ways that religious orders [live] . . . gradually [alters] their very ideological frame" (p. 157). Mary Jo Weaver in her book *New Catholic Women* (1995) sees the cultural influence as a source of tension because "traditional Catholic positions are at odds with American values of freedom, pluralism, religious

diversity, and the right to dissent" (p. 100)⁶. The encouragement from Vatican II to become aware and to adapt to the ways of the secular society has pushed women religious to realize the tension between secular culture and the Church⁷.

Rise of American Feminism--Adding to Awareness and Tension

Simultaneous with the renewal of Vatican II was the rise of modern American feminism in the 1960s and 70s. As the 1984 Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses observe,

Two events--one ecclesial and the other cultural--occurred in the 1960s to generate new questions and to unsettle familiar ways of living and thinking. The Second Vatican Council called for the reform and renewal of the church. The women's movement . . . gained new vigor and new public visibility. (p. 2)

Kulzer (1999) notes, "Some in the community were shocked and appalled (by the women's movement), but with so many women living together, talking about these things we radicalized each other by saying 'it's about us'" . Wittberg (1994) sees a correlation between the "rise of feminism among nuns" and "the increase in their anger at the Church's hierarchy" (p. 260). Weaver (1995) points out that, when studied more carefully, it would make sense that women religious be aware of, if not involved with, the feminist movement. Many women religious "have an interest in the same issues as radical feminists and women in the parish: they care about universalism, structural change, and social justice. More importantly, however, nuns have organizations and organizational skills, networks that women in the parish do not have and that radical feminists are trying to

⁶Wittberg also recognizes American ideals which clash with the Church's teachings: "American ideals of fair play, individualism, independence, and the right to confront one's accusers in a dispute were taken for granted by [American] women entering . . . and led to conflict between the sisters and their superiors" (p. 158)

⁷Tension has actually long existed between the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church and American "ideals". See information on the "Americanism Controversy" of 1899 in Wittberg 1994: 160 and Chittister et. al. 1977: 78.

build" (p. 73). Weaver obviously feels strongly that the renewal process brought about the "emergence of Catholic feminism" (p. 76). Kulzer agrees that feminism did open many sisters' eyes:

Long before lay women could run things, religious women could--so, at first we weren't as sympathetic to laywomen, but then we saw . . . that we bowed and scraped to priests and bishops as most laywomen would not have." (1999)

For obvious reasons the history of modern feminism, beginning visibly in the 1960s, will not be explored in detail here. However, it is crucial that modern feminism was occurring at the very time sisters were encouraged to take notice of secular culture, literature, and beliefs in America. Organizations such as NOW and the Redstockings were forming and making their voices heard in secular culture. As sisters were becoming more aware of their position in the Church, American women were becoming aware of their place in society. I mention NOW (National Organization for Women) and the Redstockings in particular to illustrate the two strains of emerging feminism: liberal and radical.

Liberal feminists believe in equal opportunities in the current system regardless of gender. Representing this faction is NOW. Betty Friedan, who wrote NOW's first Statement of Purpose in 1966, writes:

NOW is dedicated to the proposition that women, first and foremost, are human beings, who, like all other people in our society, must have the chance to develop their fullest human potential. We believe that women can achieve such equality only by accepting to the full the challenges and responsibilities they share with all other people in our society, as part of the decision-making mainstream of American political, economic, and social life. (taken from Feminism In Our Time, 1994, Miriam Schneir, p. 97)

On the other side of the feminist argument are the radical feminists, here represented by an organization named the Redstockings formed in New York in 1969. Radical feminists believe there are differences between women and men, that men have oppressed women

and that the differences women possess actually make them better than men in some respects. Their goal is to change the system because of its oppressive nature. From the "Redstocking Manifesto":

We [women] regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation. We cannot rely on existing ideologies as they are all products of male supremacist culture. We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience. . . . We call on all men to give up their male privileges and support women's liberation in the interest of our humanity and their own. (Shneir, p. 129)

As time went on the two strains of feminism have largely meshed, but one can still distinguish two differing points of view--sometimes within the same argument. Many people equate the word "feminism" with the ideals of the Redstockings, or radical feminists, and are then leery of calling themselves feminists. However, many sisters in this study are saying very feminist things. Some have the liberal viewpoint, those who would like to see women ordained without first changing the structure, for example. Others hold the more radical viewpoint of wanting to change the structure of the Church because of the oppressive nature of the patriarchy. In fact, as Weaver states earlier, the sisters' lives represent a radical feminism in both their all-women communal style of living and in their network of weak ties.

Wittberg's earlier work, *Creating a Future for Religious Life* (1991), addresses the advantages women religious have with the theory of "weak ties." The benefits of weak ties were first explored by Mark S. Granovetter in an article entitled "The Strength of Weak Ties" (*American Journal of Sociology* 1973). Granovetter explores the strength coming from a large network of weak interpersonal ties. Weak ties are between people who are not close friends--a relationship not requiring much time or emotional involvement. If a person has a number of weak tie bridges,

she or he will have access to more information, opportunities, and view points than one normally would. Before Vatican II, when sisters rarely traveled or interacted with other congregations, these bridges were not yet developed. Wittberg states that "women religious . . . may not be aware that they possess the oldest and most widespread network of 'bridging' weak ties of any group of women in the United States--a network whose existence stuns the few feminist scholars who are aware of its existence" (p. 72). For women religious there are many examples of weak ties working to empower, or give advantage to, the sisters. Weak ties allow sisters to mobilize, creating organizations and councils to solve issues of concern. Examples of such organizations would be the Sister Formation Conference, the Leadership Council of Women Religious, and (as we will see next) the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses.

A pamphlet by the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses: Upon This Tradition IV--Toward Full Discipleship published in 1984 confronts issues of discrimination against women. The prioresses conclude that American Benedictine women should do what they can, given their "history of autonomy, achievement, self-reliance and endurance" (p. 22) to support the women's movement and Christian feminism (defined within this pamphlet as equality). They address issues of getting rid of sexist language and combating the "sin of sexism" in theory and within formal structures (p. 20). The prioresses recognize that religious life has been a source of hope for many women struggling to overcome society-imposed limitations. While they admit progress had been made, they focus here on limits still imposed on women.

The discipline [present church discipline] suggests instead that being female is even more problematic than original sin, because baptism in the name of Jesus can heal the latter but has no power to overcome the presumed defective humanity of women. (p. 3-4)

The prioresses have not lost hope; they advise all to remember the past when Benedictine women ran churches with active leadership: "In earlier generations women had roles as prophets and apostles, heads of local churches, [and] deaconesses . . ." (p. 9) Change, they say, will only come when the rest of the Church and society remember women's abilities. In the meantime, the CABP gave numerous examples of the ways American Benedictine women can help in the feminist movement.

An even more convincing argument that the sisters in my study have an alliance with feminism can be seen in Gerda Lerner's explanation of feminist consciousness:

Feminist consciousness consists of (1) the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; (2) the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; (3) the development of a sense of sisterhood; (4) the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and (5) the development of an alternate vision of the future. (Winter et al., 1995: 3)

Renewal and feminism has led many sisters to an awareness of their subordinate position in the Church and that this lesser position is not natural. They already have a sense of sisterhood; this sisterhood is perhaps even stronger when coping with tension together. Also, their strategies and visions for the future become integral to their lives. In this sense, many of the sisters in my study have developed a feminist consciousness (as defined by Lerner).

Theoretical Outcomes

As my findings show and Weaver confirms, feminism has influenced how sisters view their position in the Church. In the pamphlet published by the CABP we see these women are reconceptualizing their

position in the church. In Weaver's book (1995), she stresses the empowerment of being "**inside outsiders**" where women religious are left out of the 'hierarchical loop' so that they feel like outsiders, yet are still within this system. She says, "their self-perception as 'outsiders' has been crucial to their decision to bond together for strength . . ." (p. 107). Wittberg's (1994) term of 'negative autonomy' (as mentioned earlier) touches on this alienation.

Weaver uses the term "inside outsiders" to explain the position of sisters who feel tension with the church. In their study of feminist women within religious structures entitled *Defecting In Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (1995), Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis (PhD in Sociology), and Allison Stokes assert the theory that women experiencing tension with the hierarchical structures of the Church "**defect in place**" rather than leave the structure. A revolution from within, so to speak. Lawrence Stone, a historian, explores the causes of revolution in his work, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (1972). He postulates that:

Steadily soaring expectations, newly created by the period of growth, shoot further and further ahead of actual satisfaction of needs. Successful revolution is the work neither of the destitute nor of the well-satisfied, but of those whose actual situation is improving less rapidly than they expect. (p. 16)

The sisters, who have experienced progress in their time, are often frustrated because new progress is slow to come and the hierarchy wants to retreat to pre-Vatican ways. As Stone points out, heightened expectations are often created by progress (the renewal process for the sisters), but problems occur when the initial progress and expectations are followed by "recession . . . and aristocratic resurgence" widening "the gap between expectations and reality" (p. 17). In the light of these causes

of revolution and given the sisters' "inside-outsider" position, it is not surprising that some of them may "defect in place".

In Winter et. al.'s chapter on Catholic women, they say "to defect in place means to leave and to stay--to leave the old way of relating and to stay on one's own terms, to be present in a whole new way" (p. 114). If, indeed, the sisters in my study do feel tension, a possible way of coping would be to defect in place--to create a new way of looking at the Church in order to cope with staying within it. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her work, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992), discusses how the "experience of alienation [caused by tension with the Church] [can be turned] into a positive vantage point from which to articulate a *different* reality on the basis of women's social experience as outsider/insider, as resident alien" (p. 89). As a result of this new way of looking at Church, "sisters, like many lay-women, have found themselves relating to each other for spiritual direction, theological insights, and liturgical celebration, thus displacing 'father' as a central authority figure in their religious lives" (Weaver p. 87). Thus, to make living in an oppressive structure more livable, sisters may find themselves envisioning a new church and a new way of seeing themselves within that church.

METHODOLOGY

My interview guide⁸ was designed to explore areas of possible tension in the lives of 30 sisters from a mid-western Benedictine community: if tension is experienced by these women, how do they cope with it while living in a Roman Catholic church structure? After conducting the 30 interviews with randomly selected sisters I found that

⁸Interview guide is included in Appendix A.

28 out of the 30 respondents (93 percent) do experience tension with the Roman Catholic Church concerning issues of women's roles in the Church. Beyond experiencing tension, I wondered, "how will sisters cope?" What patterns would emerge?

The Midwestern Benedictine community I am studying holds a wealth of information. While a quantitative study may have been possible it would not have provided the personal examples and stories which shed light on my questions. These themes are not effectively explored through a questionnaire or survey; a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with various sisters would provide richer, more valuable data. I chose this Midwestern Benedictine community because it was accessible and the members reacted enthusiastically when approached during the preliminary phase of my work. I chose the respondents randomly so that the sample would be representative of the community's various ministries and varied educational backgrounds (the sample is probably representative of the community in this regard).

I conducted six preliminary interviews with sisters from this community to refine my interview guide and to confirm the pertinence of the research. For the formal study, before I contacted any members of the community, I approached the Prioress of the Monastery with my research proposal. After meeting with her about my research and gaining her approval for the study, I began the random selection process. Sisters were chosen from the community's directory using a random numbers table. I then sent a letter⁹ introducing myself to each sister selected, briefly explaining the study, and requesting an approximately one hour interview. I followed each of the three mailings by calling each sister and

⁹Interview request letter is included in Appendix B.

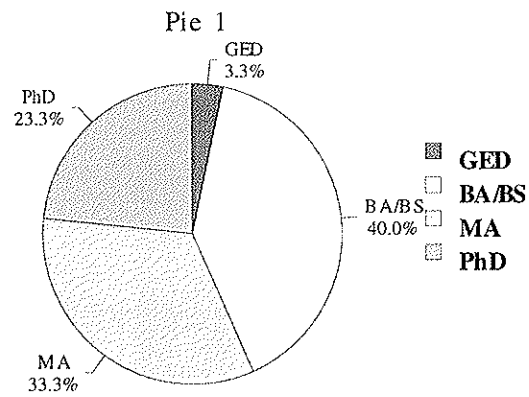
attempting to set up an interview time. I sent a total of 59 letters and was able to obtain 30 interviews.

Of the 29 with whom I did not schedule interviews, three of the sisters declined the interview due to their busy schedules. Only four declined because they said they were not interested in or comfortable with participating in the study. Two of the women could not meet due to health problems. Another two of the women were not able to coordinate meetings with me. The remaining 18 I was unable to contact by phone. A fifty percent response rate is worrisome when trying to achieve statistical representation, however this is an exploratory study. It is likely the responses would have been similar in a more representative random sample, however, the proportions would have probably differed (although to say how would only be speculation).

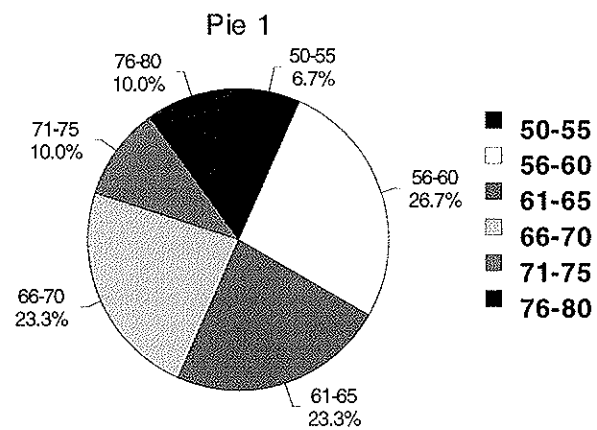
THE SAMPLE: Who are these women?

The women in this study did provide some background information about themselves, allowing us to better understand who they are. Twenty-nine of the thirty are from small Midwestern towns and cities with only one sister coming from a large Southwestern city. With the exception of two, all went to church at least weekly as children. Those same 28 all prayed often with their families when they lived at home. Eighty-seven percent of the sisters in this study, prior to entering the monastery, had relatives who were either priests or women religious. On average, they came from large Catholic families, with the average number of children in their families being nine. With the exception of one sister entering in the 1980s, the sisters entered the community between 1943 and 1968.

Education Level of Sisters in Sample



Age of Sisters in Sample



The Research

Over a period of three months I conducted 30 interviews, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Once the data was collected I attempted to group the respondents according to their answers, primarily based on whether or not they experience tension between what they feel women's roles in the Church should be and the actual restrictions imposed on women's roles in the Church. While many did not answer this question directly, answers to other questions indicate clearly where each respondent fit. After much deliberation I have placed the women in my study into three groups. Before presenting the analysis of the three groups and the coping patterns of group three, attention needs to be paid to the *tension* sisters are experiencing--I will do so now using data from the sisters

ANALYSIS I: DEFINING TENSION

Structural Inequalities Create Tension

It is clear, both from reviewing the literature and, more importantly, from my research findings that tension does exist in the lives of many sisters. First it will be necessary to provide an operational definition of the specific form of tension, including its origins and manifestations. The frustration for many sisters is that the inequalities they experience are structural. It is within the very structure of the Church's hierarchy and its teachings that this tension emerges. The clash between the way the Church is operating and the way the sisters believe it should be has developed in the last 30-40 years. As explored in detail above, renewal and feminism have influenced the sisters in their clash with hierarchy. For the respondents in this study, the tension is played out

both in current issues, such as women's ordination, and in daily reminders, such as negative experiences with clergy members. I will now explain the structural inequalities found by the sisters in the Roman Catholic Church; then I show how American feminism has aided the realization of these inequalities; finally I will exhibit how these tensions manifest in the lives of the sisters in my study.

Explaining structural inequalities, one sister says, "Structurally, there is still not a healthy respect for women; for example I am the director [of a pastoral care unit], yet the information from the church goes to the priest at the hospital" (c15). These inequalities have a strong historical basis. In *Becoming Visible*, Bridenthal and Koontz are careful to point out that "the Church did not invent misogyny" (219), however [it] did greatly perpetuate misogyny by the "Christianity of St. Paul and the early church fathers . . . [helping] to institutionalize female oppression . . . They declared women unworthy of preaching and admonished them to obey God and their spouse, created in His image" (219). This rationale was largely existent in church structures and teachings until the Second Vatican Council.

Since Vatican II, many steps by the Church and by the women's movement in the United States have given hope to many sisters that the status of women in the Church will change. As noted in the literature review, Vatican II was an impetus of this change. When Pope Paul VI invited twenty-three women to attend the latter sessions of Vatican II as auditors 'this action was . . . perceived as just a beginning. Others would follow until women would no longer be treated as minors but as full and equal members of the church' (*Guests in Their Own House* (1996), Carmel McEnroy, p.14). However, the numerous examples of tension and

feelings of injustice expressed by the sisters in this study demonstrate that the Church has not yet eradicated its unequal treatment of women. Mary Jo Weaver, in her work entitled *Springs of Water in a Dry Land* (1993), contends that the unjust treatment that existed prior to Vatican II is still existent today because “the texts, traditions, language, pastoral care, and structures of Catholicism devalue women. Even when that devaluation is not explicit, it cannot be denied” (p.60). My interviewees clearly expressed this feeling of inequality and devaluation.

My research findings back up the claim of feminist influence on sisters; as one sister says, “the emphasis on feminism in American culture does make us less malleable/receptive to the inequality in the church” (c27). Other sisters’ comments also support this premise:

I always feel like the European hierarchy isn’t in touch with American culture today. Or, that they are fearful--they fear losing the power that has always been there (evident in their balking at inclusive language, etc.). The put down of women in little ways by the Roman church, well, the church just doesn’t keep pace with American culture. Inequality of women is more evident in the Catholic Church than anywhere else in America. (c30)

Democracy and freedom are in our blood and the ideals are always there. So, to hear a MAN from ROME say “you can’t even think or talk about this [women’s ordination],” well, it’s absolutely incompatible . . . A majority of Americans will come down on the side of freedom and voice--that’s part of being an American. (c29)

The above comments support the premise, asserted by both Wittberg and Weaver in the literature review, that being American, given the history of feminism in the past 30 years, makes these women culturally more sensitive to the inequalities which exist in the Roman Catholic Church.

Manifestations Of Tension

The Priest Shortage and Women's Ordination

Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming of brethren (cf. Lk. 22:32) I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination of women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful. (**Pope John Paul II** "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*"; May 30, 1994).

The current shortage of priests is a common concern in the Church. However, for many, certainly for many women in this study, it represents a tension concerning women's roles in the Church. As will be apparent by sisters' quotes, the Church is not meeting the needs of its people because it will not recognize women and the positions they are able to hold as equal in the Church. This is demonstrated by the above quote from Pope John Paul II declaring the issue of women's ordination closed to discussion. As one sister says, "Documents of Christian theology state Eucharist as central to our faith. With the priest shortage and saying only celibate men may be ordained, many people don't have access to Eucharist even once a week" (c16). Another respondent backs this up by saying, "The church needs to be open to what is priesthood and we can be open to married and women priests--otherwise, how can we meet the needs of the people?" (c30). The issues of the priest shortage often led to other examples of how the male-based structure of the church is hurtful to the sisters and to the people in the church. As one woman says, "The Eucharist, which is supposed to be central, has become a source of division because it is so male dominated--a symbol of communion has now become a symbol of

disunion” (c17). As the interviewees speak about this issue they usually start by speaking generally of the priest shortage and its impact on the Church. This usually led to specific examples of the priest issue or other inequalities from their lived experience.

The issue of priesthood has been a source of tension on a personal level for the respondents also. The most prevalent example is when the sisters gather daily for Mass and, by many sisters’ accounts, about 5-10 times a year (maybe more) the priest who is to celebrate Mass from the neighboring monastery forgets to come¹⁰. So, the approximately 150 women who have gathered together to celebrate Eucharist may not have Eucharist that day¹¹. As one sister says, “How silly! [The neighboring men’s monastery] never has to go without Mass and we have to go without whenever the magic person doesn’t show! It’s even more ridiculous when half of the women in our community are eligible for ordination”¹² (c16).

Daily Reminders Of Tension

Personal experiences with the structural inequalities make the tension even more evident to the sisters. Examples of the patriarchy affecting their lives, aside from the priest forgetting to celebrate their Mass, were numerous. Many of the examples were from working environments the sisters have been involved with. One sister working in liturgical ministry worries about non-inclusive language:

¹⁰A reminder here for those who may not be familiar with Roman Catholic Sacramentology, only an ordained priest may perform the celebration of Eucharist. Women and married men are not allowed to be ordained in the Catholic religion.

¹¹Given the centrality of Eucharist in the daily lives of the women in this community, their frustration over their inability to celebrate Eucharist may be even more pronounced.

¹²This respondent was speaking of the number of sisters who have the theological background and pastoral training to become priests, not necessarily the number of sister who feel called to the priesthood. In my study, one sister did express the desire to become ordained.

A new lectionary is coming out and under no circumstances is the wording to be changed and it's not likely to be real inclusive. It's frustrating because it's very difficult to sit through readings where every other word is "men". (c 9)

Even more directly, other sisters have been affected by discrimination on a more personal level. One respondent is trained and working as a Chaplain, yet she is denied the title of Chaplain by the Church because she is a woman.

The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize women as Chaplains. We are certified, yet they don't recognize it. Notice we're never included on the Diocesan Roster of Clergy and Chaplains, BUT we're still expected to do everything a Chaplain does (except sacramental things). (c25)

Another sister, working in a large suburban parish, cited numerous times she has encountered "excessively traditional young priests who want to keep women in their place":

About three years ago, I was saying the readings for Mass--the young priest was VERY traditional. I read "Brothers and Sisters" and the priest was very upset. He said to the parish, " 'and sisters' were not Paul's words, they were Sister _____'s". Afterward he yelled at me and said I was giving a 'gender blessing,' not a spiritual one. In response I said to him, 'If we aren't included in the spiritual blessings, what are we doing in the church?' (c 5)

Another sister explained how she was made to feel powerless, even in a position of power, because she was a woman:

I was a school principal in a parish and there was a great conflict of authority--over who was in charge of what. I felt that if I am responsible for a school then I need to do it--to have authority. Yet, my authority was challenged by the pastors and male clergy, who weren't really educators, but thought they were. (c 25)

For the respondent quoted above, Patricia Wittberg's term negative autonomy explains her feelings of frustration. As a school principle she is given a position of power within a church structure, yet because she is a woman her power is illusory since it is the male clergy members that had ultimate decision making power--an issue of clericalism.

Clericalism, control by those who are ordained ministers, was an issue mentioned by other sisters as well:

I worked full time as a counselor at a juvenile delinquent facility. There was a priest on staff and two Protestant ministers who worked about 5-6 hours a week. There was a vote that all ordained ministers would get a raise, so those men all got raises and I didn't, even though my position made me their superior. I talked to the department head, but nothing could be done. (c12)

The same sister experienced frustration in her actual work situation as well:

I worked closely with these kids and they would say, "why don't you say Mass?" and I thought, "why can't I?". These kids trusted me and wanted Confessions, and I heard many Confessions, but only the priest, who didn't know these kids and their situations at all, could absolve them and officially hear their Confessions. I was their counselor! It was so odd to have to take them to a stranger when I knew them. . . the injustice of the system! (c12)

For other sisters, the examples were not related around work, but around their life. One sister states, "I don't go to Church daily anymore because I don't like to see one MAN in the middle" (c27). Another sister is bothered by her faith life being dominated by clerics.

There are every day tensions. Male providers of Eucharist, only male confessors in Sacramental Reconciliation, etc. Women's work in the Church is invisible and it angers me when the hierarchy easily gives promotion after promotion to men and men's groups. Staying in communication with male clergy when my opinion often differs so much is hard . . . (c14).

These are all examples of tension manifesting in sisters' daily lives.

Alienation and Disempowerment

Feminists experience a kind of alienation in being simultaneously participants and outsiders in both our cultural and religious traditions as well as in the communities that marginalize and oppress us. (Fiorenza 1992: 88)

This quote from Fiorenza accurately describes the views of a number of sisters in my study, regardless of whether they would identify themselves as feminists. These women are participants in the Catholic Church, yet their alliance with women's issues makes them outsiders. Feelings of alienation, disempowerment, and sometimes resentment do exist for some respondents in relation to the Church: because they are

women, because their beliefs contradict teachings of the church, because of their unique position within a church structure. One sister asks, “where do monastic women fit in the Church?” (c15). As highly educated monastic women, the sisters in my study have a feeling of being empowered by their position, yet when they are put in positions that should give them control they are continually marginalized (see examples given above). As Wittberg (1994) confirms, “both national surveys and anecdotal accounts [uncovered] a deep reservoir of alienation from the institutional Church among women in religious orders” (p. 262). Even when the sisters and women around the nation try to dialogue with the Church about women’s issues, their suggestions and pleas are ignored¹³.

Sisters experiencing clericalism at the hands of Church structure and teaching feel disempowered. The sister quoted above (c12) who worked in the juvenile detention center says, “there’s not much I can do. . . I mean, how do you fight the hierarchy?” (c12). They are frustrated with the patriarchal control over aspects of their faith. One sister says, “I feel discouraged by the hierarchy . . . I wonder how [the holy spirit will work to make change] when the hierarchy is always trying to box in the spirit rather than allowing it to be free” (c7). Another sister displays her frustration over this control when she discusses how there are times when the priest does not show to celebrate Mass at all, and then there are times when there are numerous priests around to celebrate. She explains, “There was one time when three days in a row the celebrant priest forgot to show; the next week I went to summer classes at Maryknoll and they had eight priests concelebrating!! It’s like we’re at their will and mercy! (c16). One woman (c14, as quoted earlier) has come to resent the male clergy’s

¹³See “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*” by Pope John Paul II, which declares the case of women’s ordination closed.

presence over many aspects of her faith, so much so that she has stopped attending many ceremonies. Weaver (1993) has found women saying similar things throughout her years of research; she states:

In the few studies that ask women to name their own experience in the parish, it is clear that women still working within the church structure feel invisible, powerless, unwelcome, and trivialized. They hear the sexist language of the liturgy as rejecting or hostile, and many believe that the church's refusal to ordain women is a reminder of division and inequality (p.61).

Such feelings of alienation and disempowerment at the hands of the hierarchical Church lead to tension in almost all of the women I interviewed--after reviewing the interviews in the context of theories explored in the literature review, it is not hard to imagine why.

Due to raised expectations followed by failed or slow moving results¹⁴, a revolution, of sorts, is taking place for some sisters. As we will also see, this quiet revolution from within the structures is unique because of the sisters' position within the Church. The sisters who do feel tension in my study have to struggle with a conflicted and dualistic existence. On one hand, they belong to the structure of the Catholic church; on the other they feel tension with that structure. Yet, they stay in the structure, which begs the question, how do they cope so that they can stay? It may be useful to note that the sisters I have identified as experiencing tension, no matter how they cope, do choose to stay in the community (not that it is a necessarily a conscious decision). There have been sisters, in this community and across the nation, who have chosen to leave religious life¹⁵

¹⁴As Philip Stone notes in his work, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (1972), raised expectations followed by failed or slow moving results can lead to a revolution of sorts. "The recipe for revolution is thus the creation of new expectations by . . . improvement and some social and political reforms, followed by . . . recession, governmental reaction, and aristocratic resurgence, which widen the gap between expectations and reality" (p. 17).

¹⁵For more on sisters who have left this community, see *Forever Your Sister: Reflections on Leaving Convent Life*, editors Janice Wedl, OSB and Eileen Maas Nalevanko (1998).

as a way of coping. It is important to remember the sisters in this sample are within a context of various women--both those women who have left and those women who will not be joining religious communities because of gender discrimination by the Church. While this study may give some insight as to WHY the sisters in this sample stay, the data collected really addresses more clearly HOW they stay. The groupings and coping patterns that emerged are where I will now focus.

ANALYSIS II: LIVING WITH THE TENSION

The Groupings

Group One consists of those sisters who did not experience tension with the Church. Those in Group Two acknowledge that tension exists between many sisters (though not necessarily themselves) and the Church; respondents in this group, however, do not appear to be bothered by this tension. Respondents in Group Three are those who not only experience tension with the Church, but are actively coping with the tension. Within Group Three there are three coping patterns that emerge.

Table 1

Groupings	<u>Groupings In The Sample</u>	
	<u>Coping Patterns</u>	<u>% of Sisters (N)</u>
No Tension		7% (2)
Minimal Tension		23% (7)
	Buffered	3% (1)
	Avoidant	7% (2)
	Patient	13% (4)
Tension		70% (21)
	<u>Re-Envisioners</u>	33% (10)
	<u>Agents of Change</u>	13% (4)
	<u>Community Copers</u>	23% (7)
TOTALS		100% (30)

Group One: Tension Non-Existent in Sisters' Lives.

In the first group there are only two sisters, 6 percent of the respondents. These women did not express tension so, in point of fact, they are not living with tension as defined here. As one of the two said, "I have no direct concern with Rome. . . I feel strongly that we need a central unit; the spiritual center needs to remain strong" (c23). Even though both of these sisters feel that they are representative of their community, they are the minority among the women I interviewed. The remaining 28 sisters in my study did express tension with the Church.

Group Two: Tension Has Minimal Influence In Sisters' Lives.

The second group of sisters within my study are those who feel some tension, but tend not to be bothered by the tension. Seven sisters, 23 percent, fall into this group; they are coping with the tension in such a way that it does not much affect their daily lives. When I started this

project I thought I would find that many of the sisters felt tension, but were largely buffered by the community. They might see or feel the tension, but to a much lesser degree because of their environment. After looking closely at the interviews, only one respondent really falls into this category. I found it quite interesting that only one of the 28 experiencing tension expresses a feeling of being buffered by the community. This respondent says, "I don't feel tension here, though other women (women in ministry for example) may. Outside tensions don't bother me much because there's so much support in whatever I do in community, even though the same things may not be supported by the Church . . ." (c20).

Of the other six in this group, two have intentionally chosen this community and their work situations in order to avoid tension. They know the tension exists, and may have even had direct experiences with it, but they avoid being bothered by the tension by consciously avoiding situations that bring them face to face with it. As one says, "I have deliberately avoided working in institutions that are shackling" (c11). These women were the only two in the study who explained that they spent much time researching communities and options before joining this Benedictine community.

The other four sisters in group two all acknowledge the tension also, but are resigned to theirs and others' concerns about the Church. They call themselves "patient" and reason that things will happen in due time; they will be "patient" now, but explain that they will be ready for change when it comes. In response to whether or not she feels tension, one of the respondents says,

I have no strong tension; I am patient. When the time is right, it'll be okay. This way there is no real conflict because both/and can happen--we can cooperate and it's a win/win situation. (c10)

These respondents also see the tension as necessary, as another says,

Even though mistakes are made (like not ordaining women) I have faith in the Holy Spirit and it will guide the Church--there always must be a reason for us to go through pain and mistakes. (c3)

This way of experiencing tension allows these respondents to ignore the tension because, for them, tension is temporary and possibly *necessary*; issues that concern others will eventually resolve themselves and are not worth wasting energy worrying about. As another respondent says, "I don't put a lot of psychic energy into it--I'm too busy" (c8). For women in group two, while differing in rationale, the tension has minimal effects on their lives. The women in the third group, however, are actively coping with the tension.

Group Three: Tension Is Actively Influencing Sisters' Lives.

The third group is the largest, making up 21 out of the 28, or 75 percent, of those who experience tension (70 percent of the total). These are all women who do experience the tension defined here. The difference between this and the previous group is that these women are not minimizing, but actively coping with the tension. Three basic patterns of coping seem to emerge within this group. While many of the sisters express a combination of the three, usually one way of coping seems more prevalent for each sister. I will explain each pattern of coping, using the data collected.

Group Three: Three Coping Patterns

I call the first coping pattern 'Re-Envisioners'; not seeing the hierarchy as central, they focus on what the church should be. The second coping pattern I call 'Agents of change'; expressing tension with the Church, they are able to make changes because of their position within the Church structure. The third coping pattern I call 'Community Copers'; these respondents are able to deal with the tension together by discussing, laughing, and being frustrated at the Church together.

Coping Pattern One: Re-Envisioners

"It could be a wonderful Church!" (c6)

The first model is of those sisters who **Re-envision** the church. These are sisters who have much conflict over the hierarchy and the structure of the current system. There are 10 sisters in this coping pattern, which is 36 percent of the 28 who express tension. These sisters, instead of placing much importance on Rome, envision what the church could be and should be. In fact, two of the sisters even consider their own community more of a church to them than the official church; one says, "I feel so secure in my Benedictine community--my real church" (c12). In this way, they do not feel tension with the church as they envision it, rather with the hierarchy (which is not the church that counts in their eyes). They can then focus their attention and energy on the church which they re-envision instead of on the very structure about which they feel conflicted. In this way the hierarchy and the things "it" does become irrelevant, or invalid; as one sister comments, "we aren't going to let someone in Italy run our lives" (c1). Yet, the sisters cannot ignore the hierarchy since "it" impacts their lives--thus they need to cope.

In re-envisioning the church as an entity that works better and is more inclusive, they “take it back,” so to speak; as one sister comments with vigor, “This is our church, too!”(c18).

Sisters in this coping pattern redefine both what is important for the church to be and their role in it. As Winters, et. al. explain, “this self-identification is a shift in understanding that is reflected in the metaphor ‘defecting in place’” (p. 114). When asked to interpret their place in the church through their vow of obedience, women in this coping pattern focused on being obedient to the community, the Holy Spirit, or the church as it should be. One sister says, “obedience, for me, has changed to faithfulness to my commitment [referring to the community]” (c1). Other sisters focus on listening to the spirit; a respondent explains, “I listen with openness. . . making decisions to where the spirit is leading us” (c7). Another sister agrees when she says, “obedience is a listening to the spirit in order to hear what is *really* being asked of me in my situation in life because I’m not willing to take blind orders” (c18). One sister chooses to interpret obedience in her life by explaining, “I am faithful to the *church in the present*--that means being faithful to who I am as an educated Benedictine woman in the Church at the end of the 20th century and sometimes that is ajar from where Roman officials think I should be” (c16). The respondents who are re-envisioning are focusing their attention on something other than the official Church structures.

The official church, while it still impacts them, is not central in the sisters’ vision. They hold invalid the old ideas of blind obedience to Rome and the idea of the hierarchy as infallible. Instead, they create a new way of understanding that allows them to cope with being a part of the very structures they criticize--they re-envision the structures. In doing

so, the sisters are siding with radical feminism in wanting a different system. As they re-envision, they defect in place:

It's the hierarchical emphasis that's the problem; they follow rules rather than human concern. (c15)

Sometimes there are archaic rules brought about by Rome--I don't feel guilty if I don't follow these. (c9)

I know enough about Church history to know there have always been a wide diversity of views. However, the Curia (Congregation of Faith) have been clamping down on theologians and squelching diversity. (c 18)

Throughout the disaster [referring to her punishment by the clergy for a dispute over a suggested curriculum] it never occurred to me to leave. God and the community didn't let me down, those few ignorant men did. (c19)

It's the official Church that 'proclaims' all these things--that's the 'church' that gets us in trouble. . . .The church hierarchy is losing its credibility. (c6)

The Church is *really* the People of God, but they are *very* oppressed by the Patriarchal church. (c12).

Vatican II says 'read the signs of the times' and the Church hierarchy doesn't like to do that. I believe I'm following Vatican II and the Church is being backward. (c16).

All of the above quotes explain how these respondents acknowledge the hierarchy as the source of tension and then redefine its place--the hierarchy loses its authority because of the pain the respondents see it causing. As a coping mechanism, this allows these sisters to separate themselves from that institution which is causing the tension.

Here is a brief picture of the new vision as supported by quotes already given throughout this paper. The new collective vision of the church is more humanistic and receptive to the needs of the people. The structure of the Church would be more of a consensus model rather than a strict hierarchy because, according to 53 percent of *all* respondents (not just those in pattern one), the hierarchy is the problem. The new vision is a continuance of the renewal of Vatican II and is not afraid of change.

The re-envisioned church would never leave its people without the nourishment of Eucharist due to a celibate male priest shortage. The new vision of church welcomes the leadership of laity and women and listens to their wisdom. In this vision, the church includes all people in its language, structure, and services. One woman urges that “the church has to be more pastoral and in touch with the whole person and their needs. We have to look at injustices within our own church and . . . keep changing” to create a “sense of community” (c15). Challenges and discussions are welcome—they only make this vision stronger.

As Winters, et. al., states about their sample of Catholic women, “our highly educated sample understands the dynamics of interpretation, and this has set many women free” (p.115). Likewise, my sample is very highly educated, those in this pattern also seem to understand the power of interpretation and their ability to voice that interpretation within the community. Perhaps what is unique about sisters who are re-envisioning is that they are in a position to voice and live out their vision, whereas the average lay woman may not have the built in support and opportunity of the community. The sisters can sense their unique position of support within the community, in fact four sisters stated that if they were not a part of this community they would leave the Church. It is instances like these that we can witness the quiet revolution from within the structures of the Church.

Where sisters in this community used to run hospitals and schools, sisters now have the ability to choose educational and career paths that can further their vision. This theme of the community giving opportunity is common throughout the coping patterns, as I explain later. As one respondent says, “I don’t let it [the tension] impact me because within my

life I can give witness to the work of the spirit the way I see it" (c7). Another sister explains, "The [tension] doesn't make me want to leave-- we need people to speak out from within boldly and honestly. . . This is our Church, too!" (c18). Many sisters express this sentiment of nurturing the future of the church, as one says, "I deeply love the Church and I have to help it reach its potential" (c16). For the re-envisioners, the future of the church is hopeful as long as there are people within, like them, there to protect the new vision. This is how re-envisioners cope.

Coping Pattern Two: Agents of Change

In a statement from regional leaders of Barbara Fiand's order in reaction to her demotion from teaching at the Athenaeum seminary:
 "Women . . . are automatically under suspicion . . . in church settings as being 'agents of change'." (NCR, June 5, 1998)

In feeling tension with the official church, sisters in this coping pattern see themselves as "**agents of change**." There are four sisters in the coping pattern--making up nineteen percent of those actively coping and thirteen percent of the total sample. Instead of resigning to the difficulties they face on a daily basis, these sisters decide that they can make change from within the structure. As explored in the literature review, Weaver explains the position of such sisters as "outsiders with an insider's profile," or "inside outsiders" (1995: 76). The sisters are within Catholic church structures by virtue of being vowed religious, yet they are women in a structure that is run by a male hierarchy. As has been explored above, this has lead to numerous tensions.

It should be noted that the four sisters that make up this group all work (or did work) in ministries working directly with members of the clergy. Encounters in the workplace have caused them to question their

position as women in the church. All four cited experiences that led them to look differently at their position within the Catholic church. For example, one sister states, “The tensions [felt with the official Church] have caused me to question my beliefs and roles in a way I wouldn’t have otherwise. I end up defending what I believe in . . .and I find reasons for staying” (c25). Given their “inside outsider” status, how do they cope? How do they stay?

All four sisters in this coping pattern find that their status--within the structure, yet outside it as the marginalized gender--gives them opportunity to make changes. As Weaver states, “It may be that ‘outsider’ status, in order to be effective, must be experienced paradoxically, from within the structure” (p.95). The sister who states she keeps finding reasons to stay says her biggest reason is “I feel I can do more IN the Church than out” (c25). She goes on to say that she feels empowered through the community and says, “if I weren’t in this community, I would be ordained in another denomination” (c25)¹⁶. The other sisters in this group do not claim that they would leave the Church, but do also cope by their ability to make change. One frustrated sister says that the tension is worthwhile because “we can make the biggest changes from within!” (c30). Another sister says she used her position as principal in a parish to bring awareness to women’s issues, such as inclusive language and allowing young girls to serve Mass (c24).

Sisters in this group, in seeing themselves as agents of change, also redefine the tension as positive. As one respondent says, “It [the tensions] can be very frustrating, but it encourages creativity in communication and allows us to look at how we can work within the structure to make

¹⁶This is the only respondent who expressed a desire to be ordained.

changes.” (c30). In the desire to make change from within the existing system, we can see the liberal strain of feminism. These women make change the positive outcome of the tension they experience.

Coping Pattern Three: Community Copers

The third pattern of coping is of those sisters who use the **Community as a coping mechanism**. This group makes up 7 of the 28, 25 percent of those who experience tension. Using the community as a coping mechanism is different from being buffered by the community. The respondent in group two who felt buffered by the community did not express much tension because she allowed the environment to shelter her from the tension. However, the seven sisters in this group do express a great deal of tension and are not sheltered by the community; rather they are able to be vocal and upset about these tensions together in community. These are sisters who may get very upset about the Church and things it does, but cope by “blowing their stack” amongst one another. They feel their frustrations and views are supported and felt by others within their community, so they are not alone in their tension.

Weaver predicts this inward turn while coping and empowering themselves due to tension; “sisters have achieved a kind of power among themselves by realizing that they have little power within the institutional church: their self-perception as “outsiders” has been crucial to their decision to bond together for strength . . .” (p.107). Sisters in this group commented:

Being in community helps--support is built-in and I know many who have the same feelings. We find ways to live so we aren't as impacted. If I didn't live in this community it would be very hard--I would have to blot it out somehow. (c14)

I get mad, grumpy and moody--hard to live with. It takes a good friend or group of close sisters to reason and listen to me to pull me out of my snit. (c3)

In community, I am able to depend on others' Faith when I don't have any. I look to community for that rock solid Faith. (c29)

The community becomes central for these sisters and, at least in part, their goals become to support each other within this community.

As cited before, Wittberg (1994) explains that "negative autonomy," or the practice of giving one the illusion of power, but actually giving that person (or group of persons) little actual authority, "often leads to the radicalization of those excluded" (p.262). Wittberg goes on to cite a study by Nygren and Ukeritis which found "that 'religious, in particular, are clear in their lowered respect for the magisterial authority of the church and the US hierarchy [in the Catholic church] in general'" (p.262). Indeed the sisters in this group cope with their lowered respect for church authority by "radicalizing each other". As one sisters states, "By being in the middle of radical women I feel supported . . . we can laugh at Rome together and radicalize each other" (c27). Sisters in this group cope by using the community as support.

Unifying Factor: Community Support

Even though there were three distinct coping patterns that emerged, the community as a support system was a strategy used by more than just those in coping pattern three. As I addressed earlier, there may be a feeling of alienation and disempowerment on individual levels for these women concerning the official church, however what is fascinating to note (and I might add may be unique to this community) is that not one sister in this study expressed a feeling of being alienated or disempowered within this community. In fact, 20 sisters, 66 percent, pointed out that the community helps them cope--some mentioned it as an underlying support

and others (those in coping pattern three) mention the community as their mainline of support. Regardless, it appears that by nature of being in this community many of the women in my study are better able to deal with tension as defined here. Not one sister in the study gave the impression that she feels alienated on a permanent basis¹⁷; this clearly attests to the unity of this community despite diverse views. One sister (as quoted earlier) demonstrates this feeling when she says, “I refuse to let the organizational church separate me from Jesus Christ and so the community offers a bombshelter from the slings and arrows the patriarchy throws at us” (c17).

Weaver (1995) notes a transformation of religious communities moving from “total societies” to “volunteer societies” during the renewal process in order to achieve a common purpose. Weaver quotes sociologist Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh here, “The goal of religious orders, therefore, becomes group centered rather than service oriented. What members do jobwise becomes far less important than their sharing together a supportive group life that meets the needs of the members” (p. 92). That is not to say individual ministries are not extremely important to the sisters in my study. In the past this community has started schools and hospitals; now that private businesses and the government have taken over many such tasks the sisters are free to individually pursue ministries not related to teaching, nursing, and administration. Now, the community seems to be much more important as a source of support and way of life for the sisters. Paradoxically, the community, itself a Church structure, is a key in HOW these sisters stay in the Church structures. The community is their

¹⁷It should be noted that those who may experience alienation within the community may be more likely to decline participation in this kind of research.

own and so they can empower themselves from within when there may not be any other place they could go to do the same.

CONCLUSION

As tensions mount, the sisters in my study are finding ways to cope within the structure. The question that remains is this: if the conservative “swing” of the hierarchy continues and sisters’ daily experiences increasingly are confronting these tensions, will these coping techniques continue to work? Sisters in Group Two, who are *patiently waiting* for change, may stop coping with tension in that way if the Church becomes increasingly opposed to change. For sisters in coping pattern two, the Agents of Change, as time goes on and their efforts do not bring about the change they have been working for, this coping technique will be much less effective. However, no matter what the future of the Church brings, there remain two strategies that will continue to be effective: re-envisioning and community support. Even if the Church continues alienating women, sisters will still be able to re-envision a Church which is more congruent with their beliefs and values. Regardless of such outcomes, my study shows that the sisters will always draw strength and support from each other in community.

Possibilities For Future Research

Three ideas for continuations of this study are apparent--all of which are comparative studies. The first is a comparison of sisters at a Benedictine community (such as the one in my study) to sisters in another congregation or order. For instance the coping techniques of Mercy sisters, an “active” and highly professional congregation, may differ

greatly from this community given their focal and structural differences. The second comparative study is the difference between the sisters in my study, who choose to stay and cope with the tension and those women who have left their orders and congregations because of this tension. Why do some sisters cope from within and some choose to leave? The third comparative study would be to study Roman Catholic lay women and compare the way they experience and cope with similar tensions. Given the importance of community in the coping patterns of the sisters in my study, where do lay women turn for support when experiencing similar tensions? All three studies would be valuable in learning more about women in the Roman Catholic Church. Also, these studies could aid in understanding the benefits of communal support for women when coping with tension caused by structural or cultural forces.

Learning From Their Wisdom

I have learned a great deal researching and talking with the sisters in my study. Aside from inspirational value, which I will address shortly, women religious are fascinating research subjects. Feminist scholars should be jumping at the chance to study this model of a women's community as a source of internal support and external networking. Sociologists of religion should be interested in the very unique links between spirituality, commitment and structure that characterize the lives of women religious.

In this study, the sisters' experience and wisdom in coping with tensions caused by the structural inequalities in the Roman Catholic Church can be a great benefit to all women struggling with similar issues. This study clearly indicates that the Church's "different yet equal dignity" claim does lead to unequal treatment, thus compromising the dignity of

women in the Church. This is even more clear when we see how many women the Church is alienating (see Winters et. al's *Defecting in Place*). The benefits of communal support are being realized by some lay groups such as Call To Action, WomanChurch and those meeting for alternative liturgies. It is my hope that this study will aid in the on-going dialogue on women's roles in the Church--in fact, it is my hope that the Church will recognize the validity of dialogue on women's roles.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

I. Background Information

1. Date of Entry into Saint Benedict's Monastery: _____
2. Age (current): _____
3. Education level: _____
4. Current (and previous) primary Ministry: _____

5. Hours per week spent with ministry/professional duties: _____
6. Do you currently hold any leadership positions within your congregation/order?

(list) _____
7. Have you held any leadership positions within your congregation/order in the past?

(list) _____
8. Do you currently hold any leadership positions within Church structures? (ie. Diocesan positions)?
(list) _____
9. Have you held any leadership positions within Church structures in the past?

(list) _____
10. Do you belong to any Professional organizations? _____

(list) _____
11. Have you, now or ever, held office in any of those organizations?

(list) _____
12. Where are you from? (city, state, and size) _____

13. How many sibling do you have? _____
14. Where are you in the sibling order? _____

Family Religious Background

15. How often did you family attend mass? Frequently (5-7xweek) Often (3-4xweek) Weekly Only on Occasion Never or Almost Never
16. How often did your family pray together? Frequently (5-7xweek) Often (3-4xweek) Weekly Only on Occasion Never or Almost Never
17. Are any of your relatives priests or religious? (were they before or after you joined)?

II. Motivations

18. Name your top two motivations for joining the Monastery.
19. Are there any changes since you joined (in your congregation or in the Church) that have dramatically influenced or impacted you?

III. Concerns

20. Name your top two or three concerns you have with the future of your congregation/order:
21. Name your top two or three concerns for the future of the Church:

IV. Tensions

22. Consider the roles you play in your congregation, your work or ministry, and in the Church . . . do you ever feel tension or conflict between differing roles?

. . . if there is tension felt:

23. Do you consider this tension to have a positive, negative, or neutral impact on your life?
24. (if ever negative or frustrating . . .)How do you get through the tension—do you let it sit or do you deal with it? In what ways? etc. . .

V. Fitting it all together

25. How does being in a community such as this effect you and your way of dealing with tensions or life's frustrations?

26. Can you explain how being an American in a Roman church effects you personally?

Does the Roman hierarchy effect you at all? Does American culture?

VI. Vow of Obedience

27. Does the vow of obedience somehow shape your relationship with the Church or is it irrelevant? (*or, what does the vow of obedience mean to you in your daily life?*)

VII. Representative:

28. Are you representative of your congregation/order in your views, beliefs, actions?

29. Why or why not?

Appendix B: Interview Request Letter

Dear S.

My name is Tara Tollefson and I am a senior Sociology major at the College of Saint Benedict. With the permission of Prioress Ephrem Hollermann, I am conducting interviews with 30 randomly-chosen members of Saint Benedict's Monastery. The interviews will be used for my Senior Honors Research Project. I have chosen to research American Benedictine Sisters and their experience as American women and women in the Church.

Your name was chosen randomly from the Monastery's telephone directory. I am writing to request your assistance with my research by participating in an interview conducted by me. The interview itself will take about an hour. I will be contacting you by phone in the next week to set up an interview time that works for us both. I have spoken at length with Prioress Ephrem Hollermann about this project—she is very supportive and eager to assist with this work. However, she wishes me to stress whether or not you participate is completely up to you.

If you have any questions or concerns, we can discuss them when I call to set up a time. Otherwise, feel free to email or phone me with questions or concerns. I am trying to complete these interviews by the end of this semester, so your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

It is my admiration for the Benedictine women I have encountered and respect for your community that has led my research in this direction. I want to assure you that I will conduct this research professionally and with great respect for your community and the gifts each of you bring. I am very excited about this project!
Thank you so much for your time!

Sincerely,

Tara L. Tollefson